

EXAMINING SCHOOL CONNECTEDNESS AND COMMUNICATION WITH NEW AMERICAN PARENTS

Created by:

Midwest and Plains Equity Assistance Center

November, 2017





About the Centers

Great Lakes Equity Center (Center) is an educational research and service center located in Indiana University's School of Education at IUPUI. The Center engages in equity-focused technical assistance and related research with educational and community agencies focused on systemic improvements to serve all learners with particular focus on educational access, participation and outcomes for those who have been historically marginalized. Midwest and Plains Equity Assistance Center is a project of the Center and provides technical assistance related to educational equity based on student race, national origin, sex, and religion at no cost to public educational agencies throughout its 13-state region in the Midwest and Plains.



Acknowledgements

A special thanks to Global Friends Coalition, a 501(c)3 non-profit organization aiming to bring together the Grand Forks, ND, community to foster New American integration. Specifically, we thank Kathryn Kester for her tireless assistance connecting with New American parents and arranging the focus groups. In addition, we thank Kelly Phommachanh, our undergraduate intern from the University of North Texas, for her research assistance, note taking, and insights as a refugee child.



About This Tool

Communication and connectedness between schools and New American students and families are important to support the academic and social success of students. This tool highlights areas of importance for New American parents stemming from focus groups and invites schools to assess their communication and connectedness with New American students and families with the purpose to improve two-way channels of engagement. Purposes of this tool are to:

- facilitate a discussion among school personnel and others working with New American students and families on areas of improvement to better communicate and engage parents,
- provide information in the form of brief "tools" that may be used by teachers and other school personnel to examine school and/or district-wide initiatives pertaining to New American students and families, and
- raise awareness of the needs of New American children in the schools.



Introduction

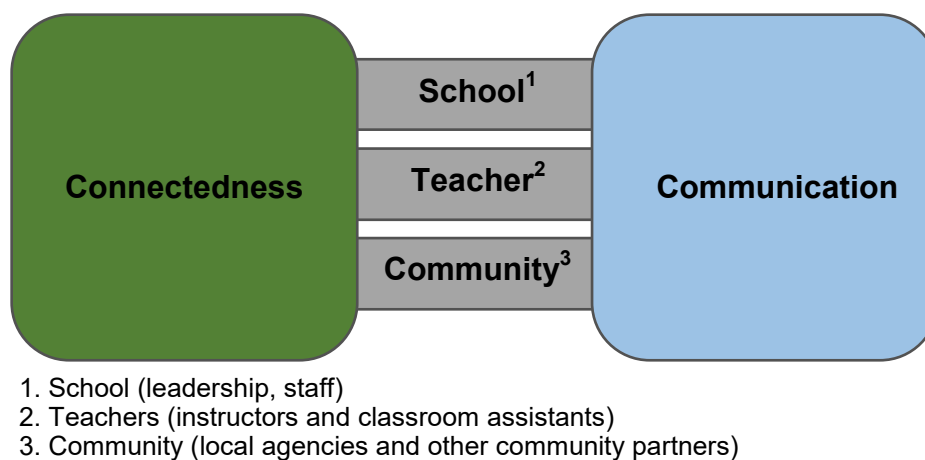
Classrooms across the country are becoming more diverse, even in rural school districts (Woods & Hanson, 2016). The immigrant population in the U.S. has tripled in the last three decades. In 1970, the percentage of immigrants was only 4.7 percent of the total U.S. population compared to 13.4 percent today (López & Bialik, 2017). The U.S. foreign-born population reached a peak in 2015 of 43.2 million people. Of that, approximately 840,000 immigrant K-12 students were enrolled in U.S. public schools (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). Statistics show that foreign-born immigrants or those born to immigrants in the U.S. are the two fastest growing populations in the U.S. (Fortuny, Hernandez, & Chaudry, 2010; Nwosu, Batalova, & Auclair, 2014; Woods & Hanson, 2016).

Schools are one of, if not the most, critical institutions to the success of immigrant integration (Adelman & Taylor, 2015; Olneck, 2004; Olsen, 1997). Schools are essential to meeting the needs of immigrant students and their families, and the success of schools is highly dependent on how well they address these needs (Adelman & Taylor, 2015). Research has demonstrated time and again that immigrant families have a strong desire for their children to be successful in school and in life, and encourage a strong work ethic (Isik-Ercan, 2012). These characteristics provide resilience to overcome various challenges associated with being in new environment and cultural context, and for some immigrant youth, navigating these spaces in a language other than that which is spoken in their home (McBrien, 2005).

Immigrant students often adapt much quicker than their parents (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2009), but given that parents direct and influence their children's education, it is important for schools to empower parents to be involved in an education system that can be very different from what they know (Georgis, Gokiart, Ford, & Ali, 2014; Hamilton, Marshall, Rummens, Fenta, & Simich, 2011). Parents may oftentimes feel weakened and disempowered from their roles as parents in their children's education, especially in the school environment (Bowie, Wojnar, & Isaak, 2017; Isik-Ercan, 2012; Gonzalez, Borders, Hines, Villalba, & Henderson, 2013; Morrison & Bryan, 2014; Olnek, 2004; Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco, and Todorova, 2008). Although teachers and school leaders may try to engage immigrant parents through traditional methods that have been found to work for domestic parents, these traditional practices do not take into account other cultural and unspoken norms (Isik-Ercan, 2012; Olivos & Mendoza, 2010; Tran & Hodgson, 2015). In some cultures, showing respect for teachers and schools means parents keeping their distance and giving teachers their autonomy; it is considered disrespectful if parents question teachers' expertise and knowledge by participating too closely in their child's education (Gonzalez et al., 2014; Koch, 2007; Morrison & Bryan, 2014; Peguero & Bondy, 2011; Sobel & Kugler, 2007; Tran & Hodgson, 2015). A variety of other issues may impact parents' engagement with teachers and schools, for example, work schedules, limited English language proficiency, the lack of culturally competent staff for outreach, limited resources (i.e. computer), and limited formal education (Georgis, Gokiart, Ford, & Ali, 2014; Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco, and Todorova, 2008).

As a result, teachers and school leaders that communicate well and make New American parents feel connected to their children's schools are going to be more successful in achieving results for their New American students (Carreon, Drake, & Barton, 2005). However, communicating and connecting with New American parents cannot be done in the traditional methods. This toolkit is a product from research gathered from focus groups with New American parents in a rural school district. Based on parents' perspectives, this toolkit highlights and creates discussion around some of the most important areas for New American parents to understand, communicate and become connected to their children's school.

The graphic summarizes the two key areas and stakeholders that support connectedness and communication with New American parents and families.



Context

This tool was developed from data gathered in focus groups with New American parents, primarily refugees from Eastern Africa (Somali and Ethiopian) and South Asia (Bhutan), with children enrolled in a rural Northern Plains school district. The families had been in the U.S. ranging from several months to almost a decade. The parents' English language proficiency also ranged from beginner to advanced so a certified interpreter assisted with all focus groups.

This rural Northern Plains state has been resettling refugees as early as the 1940s during World War II from Germany, Lithuania, Estonia, and Latvia. (LSSND, n.d.). Over the years, refugees from Cuba, Uganda, the Dominican Republic, and Southeast Asia, including Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos, have been resettled in this rural state. In the mid-1970s, this state became the primary resettlement site for Kurdish refugees, and more recently, refugees from Bhutan, Iraq, and Somalia have been the larger groups to be resettled.

In 2016-2017, a total of 330 New Americans was resettled in this rural state, including 125 from Bhutan, 79 from Iraq, and 64 from Somalia. Others are from Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Sudan. Given that Bhutanese and Somali refugees had the larger representation in this school district, these parents were asked to participate in the focus groups.

Since most refugees are resettled in urban areas, including the states of California, Texas, and New York, research has focused on these urban areas. Research examining refugees' experiences in rural areas is sparse. We aim to address this gap.



Instructions

This tool organizes around two key areas for improving two-way channels of engagement between new American families and schools. This tool asks school teams or representative of school stakeholders to rate the extent to which core school-, teacher-, and community- initiated practices foster, promote, and encourage two ways of engaging families: connectedness and communication. Each key domain also includes implementable strategies and some areas of additional resources.

Instructions:

1. Assemble a group that is representative of school stakeholders (leadership, staff, and community partners)
2. Individually, read and assign a score to each indicator for the areas according to the following rating criteria:
 - 3 = The practice is in place (i.e., More than 80% of staff or school facilities/ operations reflect the practice)
 - 2 = The practice is partially in place (i.e., 50-80% of staff or school facilities/ operations reflect the practice)
 - 1 = The practice is not in place (i.e., Less than 50% of staff or school facilities/ operations reflect the practice)
3. Sum the ratings for and write the value in the "Total Rating" space for the two areas.
4. Discuss your ratings and justifications for your ratings as a team and come to a consensus on which practices rates the lowest overall and strategize on priorities for the team.

Connectedness		
School Initiated	Evidence	Self-Rating (1-3)
Newcomer families are provided with school information that promote integration (e.g. course schedules, attendance policy, layout of the school, role of non-teaching staff, discipline in the school context)	An orientation with cultural sensitivities in mind to explain school policies and how these may differ from their home country.	
Appropriate cultural sensitivity and background of families served includes training of cafeteria workers, bus drivers, and school receptionist.	Cultural competency training as professional development for school staff .	
Cultural events that include resources needed, activities/engagement, and outcomes that highlight community strengths and assets, including the perspectives, talents, and expertise of community members throughout planning and execution of event.	An evening highlighting a cultural dish, music, cultural practices (i.e. henna) involving parents, students, and community.	
Teachers are provided with professional development that includes appropriate understanding of various cultures and backgrounds of students served.		
Dedicated staff member for outreach activities with New American families.	A staff member serves as an advocate/liaison to families and community organizations.	
Notes and Comments		Total Rating:

Strategies to Employ
<p>Create opportunities for parents</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Create a diverse welcoming committee at school made up of parents, staff, and community members. This is a great way to support parents who are new to the country. <p>Avoiding information overload</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Plan events with specific ways of communicating goals to parents; compartmentalize information as to avoid information overload. Information fairs may be overwhelming, and New American parents may be nervous about approaching information tables. <p>Allocate appropriate resources</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ensure that resources generated by and allocated for newcomers are properly and effectively expended to provide quality instruction and services. Support school leadership to seek resources for newcomer programs and services from the district and community partners.
Additional Resources
<p>Short, D. J., & Boyson, B. A. (2012). <i>Helping newcomer students succeed in secondary schools and beyond</i>. Washington, DC: Center for Applied Linguistics (p. 52). Retrieved from http://www.cal.org/resource-center/publications/helping-newcomer-students</p>

Connectedness		
Teacher Initiated	Evidence	Self-Rating (1-3)
Parents are asked about their expectations for their child's experience in the classroom as a form of connecting with parents and reassure parents as their children transition.	Teachers informally communicating with parents about their child's education.	
Classroom routines and schedule are demystified through graphic flyers sent home.		
Parents are invited to participate in the classroom through various capacities throughout the year.	Parents may be asked to volunteer in class or come in to read with their student.	
Teachers are aware and understand norms of the various cultures of their students; teachers take initiative to connect to parents without expecting parents to take the initiative.		
Assigning homework or academic activities for students to complete at home with parents.	Teachers assigning academic work to be completed at home as a way to engage parent in the child's education.	
Notes and Comments		Total Rating:

Strategies to Employ

Home Visits

- Home visits by the teacher can show care and empathy to the student and family. It also shows initiative from the teacher, which will help break down any barriers of communication and connectedness.
- It is important to note that while home visits allow for a deeper connection to the family and the student, culture and intentional approach must be taken into consideration. In some cultures, a home visit may signal that there is something severely wrong in students' behavior, academic progress, etc. In addition, as a figure of authority and representative of the school, the family may be intimidated by the presence of the teacher in their home and thus reluctant to receive them.

Parent Letters & Notes

- Letters and notes written by the teacher to the family keeps parents updated on their children's progress and daily happenings. Also, since it is written, parents can read and reread the notes because of limited English proficiency. It also shows initiative from the teacher to the student and family.

Homework and/or activities

- Assigning homework or activities that students can do at home with their parents are a natural connector for parents with their children's school since education and academics is highly respected and revered.

"My son [was] sick and the teacher came two times [to my house]. I feel like they are a part of my family, because [of the care demonstrated in] my son being sick." - Somali mother

Additional Resources

Adair, J.K. & Barraza, A. (2015). Teaching ideas from immigrant families. *Teaching Young Children*, 8(4), 11–13.

Parent Teacher Home Visits (n.d.). Retrieved from <http://www.pthvp.org>.

There's No Place Like Home Visits with Parents (n.d). Retrieved from <http://www.nea.org/home/34090.htm>

Tobin, J., Arzubiaga, A., & Adair, J. K. (2013). *Children crossing borders*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

Connectedness		
Community Initiated	Evidence	Self-Rating (1-3)
Families and students participate in the planning and organization of cultural nights or other culturally relevant events in and around the school and community. Cultural events should include resources needed, activities/engagement, and outcomes that highlight community strengths and assets, including the perspective, talents and expertise of community members throughout planning and execution of event.	Parents and students are part of the planning of cultural events and activities around school.	
Community leaders and community organizations have been identified and meet twice a year to create programming to engage families to learn about schooling in the United States and to show them how to be involved in their children's education.		
Notes and Comments		Total Rating:

“They let us express our culture like Culture Night. Sharing food, sharing culture, our customs, so it's very comfort[ing].”

Communication		
School Initiative	Evidence	Self-Rating (1-3)
Parents are asked of their preferred language for receiving printed information.	Schools have a form that asks for parents' preferred language for communication purposes.	
Parents are informed that they can request interpretation services anytime when communicating with school leaders, staff, and teachers about their children's education.	School teachers, staff, and leaders are reminded to offer interpretation and provide interpretation services to those who may need it.	
School posts a physical sign in multiple languages in various areas of the school, especially in front office, informing that parents have access to language interpretation.	These signs are written in various languages and can be provided by the telephonic interpreting company.	
Notes and Comments		Total Rating:

Strategies to Employ
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Contract with a professional interpreting service, either face-to-face or telephonic service, depending on availability in your area. Do not utilize friends or family for interpretation as the quality of interpretation may not be adequate, the school may be violating student privacy and FERPA laws, and the friend or family member may withhold information. Use your school newsletter to recruit bilingual parent volunteers. They can help with simple phone calls to relay information that is not student sensitive and other contacts with parents who speak little or no English. Use simple printed or typed messages on flyers. Avoid cursive writing, as it's not always taught in other countries. Text messages are preferred over phone calls. Parents with limited English language ability can read and reread typed messages. Parents can also get assistance from a third party.

Communication		
Teacher Initiative	Evidence	Self-Rating (1-3)
Parents are informed they have access to interpretation services at no cost to them anytime they communicate with the teacher or school staff.	Teachers and staff are reminded to offer interpretation services; a flyer to remind parents may be sent home with students.	
There are opportunities to meet without the child present in case the parents want to share any sensitive information.		
For sensitive information, unbiased professional interpreters are provided (Family or community members should not be relied upon).	Using certified interpreters for all official school business.	
Language and educational levels of parents are considered in communication sent home.	Be careful not to assume all parents will or can understand information sent home.	
Teachers give parents ample opportunities for communication outside of parent/teacher conferences; teacher should take initiative to invite parents to communicate because of other cultural norms		
Notes and Comments:		Total Rating:

Strategies to Employ
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School districts should employ certified interpreters when verbally communicating with parents, especially when matters may pertain to students' academic or social well-being. In smaller communities, many times there are direct partnerships with social services agencies who can identify interpretation and translation resources they utilize. • Although some parent/teacher conferences may include the student, parents would like to have some time privately with the teacher to discuss sensitive matters. • Rely on text messages over phone calls so parents can read and reread messages.

Communication		
Community Initiative	Evidence	Self-Rating (1-3)
There is an established group of volunteers to help communicate with families with limited English ability at events such as Open House and/or Parents' Night.	School liaison keeps a list of volunteers who can assist with New American families at events and activities.	
Provide food and free childcare at school and community events so that families can bring their children to help facilitate communication between families and schools.		
Free transportation may be provided to families without access to facilitate communication and attendance at events.	Provided by school or volunteers.	
Notes and Comments:		Total Rating:

Conclusions
<p>From the data gathered in the focus groups, parents generally felt welcomed at their children's schools. Education was a high priority for the parents, and they generally felt connected to the school through their children's academic development. However, because of various aspects of being a New American, there are additional strategies that schools could employ to help bridge the cultural and communication gap. This toolkit addressed the areas most highlighted in the focus groups.</p>



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Recommended citation: Nguyen, H.K., & Hoy, Z. R. M. (2017). *Equity Tool: Examining School Connectedness and Communication with New American Parents*. Indianapolis, IN: Great Lakes Equity Center.

Disclaimer: Midwest and Plains Equity Assistance Center is committed to the sharing of information regarding issues of equity in education. Reference in this tool to any specific publication, person, or idea is for the information and convenience of the public and does not necessarily reflect the views and opinions of Midwest and Plains Equity Assistance Center. The contents of this tool were developed under a grant from the U.S. Department of Education (S004D110021). However, these contents do not necessarily represent the policy of the Department of Education, and endorsement by the Federal Government should not be assumed.

